

Statement of

The Honorable Arlen Specter

United States Senator
Pennsylvania
July 19, 2006

Mark-Up Statement

Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, and Coretta Scott King Voting Rights
Act Reauthorization and Amendments Act of 2006

Congress has played a vital role in assuring that all Americans have equal access to the ballot by passing the landmark legislation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It is frightening to imagine what America might look like today without the civil rights revolution and Voting Rights Act of 1965. One need only look at the lives of three Civil Rights leaders for whom this bill is named to appreciate that fact.

Fannie Lou Hamer first learned that African Americans had a constitutional right to vote in 1962, when she was 44 years old. Ms. Hamer dedicated herself to registering other African Americans in the South, despite death threats and violence. Ms. Hamer later explained, "The only thing they could do to me was to kill me, and it seemed like they'd been trying to do that a little bit at a time ever since I could remember. "

Every American school child knows the story of Rosa Parks who, on Dec. 1, 1955, refused to give up her bus seat to a white passenger. Rosa Parks later explained her motivation: "People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically I was not old, I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in."

Coretta Scott King, the widow of pioneering civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., devoted a lifetime to opposing racism - whether 1960s segregation in Alabama or 1980s apartheid in South Africa. Fortunately, she lived to see so much of the progress America has made. Sadly, the forces of hate deprived her husband of that.

Thanks to these women, the America of today is not the America of 1965, when the Voting Rights Act was needed to protect voters from violence. But no level of discrimination is acceptable. That is why I am personally committed to reauthorizing the Voting Rights Act.

This Committee has worked with lightning speed.

- o In just 9 work weeks, we will have concluded 8 hearings and received testimony from 41 witnesses.

- o Plus, my staff has reviewed the record amassed by the House, which includes 12,000 pages of testimony, the 502 voting rights cases decided since 1982, and 91 objection letters issued by the Department of Justice since 1995.

- o We have almost completed compiling a comprehensive list of every incident of discrimination listed in the House and Senate records. That document exceeds 200 pages.

The bill we will vote on today accomplishes a number of important things:

- o It strengthens voting rights protections nationwide by allowing voters who successfully challenge illegal voting practices to recover all reasonable expenses of litigation.
- o It extends the protections for voters with limited English skills for 25 years. These voters will continue to enjoy the protection of bilingual ballots and assistance at the polls.
- o It also extends for 25 years the requirement that the Department of Justice preclear any voting change in certain, "covered" jurisdictions where there has been a history of discrimination.
- o The bill clarifies how the pre-clearance protections should work, guaranteeing that voting laws enacted with a discriminatory purpose never get enacted into law.
- o Finally, the bill seeks to overturn the Supreme Court's decision in *Georgia v. Ashcroft*. This change will protect minorities' ability to hold elected office in bodies such as Congress.

I am proud that this Senate has been able to move so expeditiously and on a bipartisan basis. I am proud to vote for this important legislation.